

§ 209.319 Prehearing conference.

(a) The parties shall confer with the presiding officer, either in person or by telephone, for a conference at least 10 days before the hearing to consider:

(1) Formulation and simplification of the issues;

(2) Stipulations, admissions of fact, and admissions of the contents and authenticity of documents;

(3) Advance rulings from the presiding officer on the admissibility of evidence;

(4) Identification of witnesses, including the scope of their testimony, and of hearing exhibits;

(5) Possibility of settlement; and

(6) Such other matters as the presiding officer deems necessary to expedite the disposition of the proceeding.

(b) The record shall show the matters disposed of by order and by agreement in such a prehearing conference. The subsequent course of the hearing shall be controlled by such action.

(c) The prehearing conference shall be held within 150 days after receipt of respondent's request for a hearing under § 209.311.

§ 209.321 Hearing.

(a) Upon receipt of a hearing request complying with § 209.311, an administrative hearing for review of a notice of proposed disqualification shall be conducted by a presiding officer, who can be any person authorized by the FRA Administrator, including an administrative law judge. The hearing shall begin within 180 days from receipt of respondent's hearing request. Notice of the time and place of the hearing shall be given to the parties at least 20 days before the hearing. Testimony by witnesses shall be given under oath and the hearing shall be recorded verbatim. The hearing shall be open to the public, unless the presiding official determines that it would be in the best interests of the respondent, a witness, or other affected persons, to close all or any part of it. If the presiding official makes such a determination, an appropriate order, which sets forth the reasons therefor, shall be entered.

(b) The presiding officer may:

(1) Administer oaths and affirmations;

(2) Issue subpoenas as provided by § 209.7;

(3) Adopt procedures for the submission of evidence in written form;

(4) Take or cause depositions to be taken as provided in § 209.8;

(5) Rule on offers of proof and receive relevant evidence;

(6) Examine witnesses at the hearing;

(7) Convene, recess, reconvene, adjourn, and otherwise regulate the course of the hearing;

(8) Hold conferences for settlement, simplification of the issues, or any other proper purpose; and

(9) Take any other action authorized by or consistent with the provisions of this subpart and permitted by law that may expedite the hearing or aid in the disposition of an issue raised therein.

(c) FRA has the burden of proof, by a preponderance of the evidence, as to the facts alleged in the notice of proposed disqualification, the reasonableness of the conditions of the qualification proposed, and, except as provided in § 209.329(a), the respondent's lack of fitness to perform safety-sensitive functions. The Chief Counsel may offer relevant evidence, including testimony, in support of the allegations contained in the notice of proposed disqualification and conduct such cross-examination as may be required for a full disclosure of the material facts.

(d) The respondent may appear and be heard on respondent's own behalf or through respondent's designated representative. The respondent may offer relevant evidence, including testimony, in defense of the allegations or in mitigation of the proposed disqualification and conduct such cross-examination as may be required for a full disclosure of the material facts. Respondent has the burden of proof, by a preponderance of the evidence, as to any affirmative defense, including that respondent's actions were in obedience to the direct order of a railroad supervisor or higher level official.

(e) The record shall be closed at the conclusion of the hearing, unless the parties request the opportunity to submit proposed findings and conclusions. When the presiding officer allows the parties to submit proposed findings and conclusions, documents previously

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identified for introduction into evidence, briefs, or other posthearing submissions the record shall be left open for such time as the presiding officer grants for that purpose.

[54 FR 42907, Oct. 18, 1989, as amended at 60 FR 53136, Oct. 12, 1995]

§ 209.323 Initial decision.

(a) The presiding officer shall prepare an initial decision after the closing of the record. The initial decision may dismiss the notice of proposed disqualification, in whole or in part, sustain the charges and proposed disqualification, or sustain the charges and mitigate the proposed disqualification.

(b) If the presiding officer sustains the charges and the proposed disqualification, dismisses some of the charges, or mitigates the proposed disqualification, the presiding officer shall issue and serve an appropriate order disqualifying respondent from engaging in the safety-sensitive functions described in § 209.303. If the presiding officer dismisses all of the charges set forth in notice of proposed disqualification, a dismissal order shall be issued and served.

(c) Each initial decision shall contain:

(1) Findings of fact and conclusions of law, as well as the reasons or bases therefor, upon all the material issues of fact and law presented on the record;

(2) An order, as described in paragraph (b) of this section;

(3) The dates any disqualification is to begin and end and other conditions, if any, that the respondent must satisfy before the disqualification order is discharged;

(4) The date upon which the decision will become final, as prescribed in § 209.325; and

(5) Notice of the parties' appeal rights, as prescribed in § 209.327.

(d) The decision shall be served upon the FRA Chief Counsel and the respondent. The Chief Counsel shall provide a copy of the disqualification order to the railroad by which the respondent is employed.

§ 209.325 Finality of decision.

(a) The initial decision of the presiding officer shall become final 35 days

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after issuance. Such decisions are not precedent.

(b) *Exception.* The initial decision shall not become final if, within 35 days after issuance of the decision, any party files an appeal under § 209.327. The timely filing of such an appeal shall stay the order in the initial decision.

§ 209.327 Appeal.

(a) Any party aggrieved by an initial decision issued under § 209.323 may file an appeal. The appeal must be filed within 35 days of issuance of the initial decision with the Federal Railroad Administrator, 400 Seventh Street, SW., Washington, DC 20590. A copy of the appeal shall be served on each party. The appeal shall set forth objections to the initial decision, supported by reference to applicable laws and regulations, and with specific reference to the record. If the Administrator has played any role in investigating, prosecuting, or deciding to prosecute the particular case, the Administrator shall recuse him or herself and delegate his or her authority under this section to a person not so involved.

(b) A party may file a reply to an appeal within 25 days of service of the appeal. If the party relies on evidence contained in the record for the reply, the party shall specifically refer to the pertinent evidence in the record.

(c) The Administrator may extend the period for filing an appeal or a response for good cause shown, provided the written request for extension is served before the expiration of the applicable period provided in paragraph (c) or (d) of this section.

(d) The Administrator has sole discretion to permit oral argument on the appeal. On the Administrator's own initiative or upon written motion by any party, the Administrator may determine that oral argument will contribute substantially to the development of the issues on appeal and may grant the parties an opportunity for oral argument.

(e) The Administrator may affirm, reverse, alter, or modify the decision of the presiding officer, or may remand the case for further proceedings before